

What Do Your Lockdown Reading Habits Reveal?



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Movement restrictions imposed by COVID-19, including being completely homebound, have been a norm for many. Across the globe, people have spent weeks or months virtually locked in their homes.

Those with poor reading habits are more likely to experience negative emotions ranging from boredom to confusion. They struggle against feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness that lurk behind such experiences.

The crisis of the educated

The lifestyle of the educated elite in the days of COVID-19 lockdowns is an interesting topic for discussion. I heard that during COVID-19 lockdowns even people with high educational attainment were completely unprepared for staying at home.

They lapsed into lethargy and passivity that often leads to sadness. Despair has been their worst fear and, in their case, the most probable scenario. Lockdown boredom of the educated indicates their lack of reading habits and shows the failure of the modern education system.

A learned person should find happiness in reading, research and other meaningful mental work. Isn't it a contradiction in terms for "educated people" to be busier with activities other than reading and writing?

The fact that the so-called educated classes feel useless stuck at home reveals the inadequacy of the education system. It has not produced truly enlightened people who grab every opportunity to study and learn.

Strange that educated people can feel bored, or spend long hours watching television, while there is so much to read and write.

True scholars versus academic careerists

The internal struggle of such educated people becomes more apparent when they are in the academic world.

Being academic but averse to scholarship suggests a deep-seated conflict between their profession and personal inclination. For them, learning is not a continuous process and ends with finding a livelihood.

In the field of knowledge and scholarship, the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the distinctions between two groups of academics. There are those true scholars who have chosen their profession out of interest and conviction.

On the contrary, there are those academic careerists who acquire education as a luxury brand. Accordingly, they use their degrees for career opportunities in academia out of economic or social necessity.

Between these two groups, the true scholars have an edge over the unenlightened mind. They kept away from the worst of anxiety and mood disorders that the COVID-19 epidemic caused. Being true lovers of knowledge, they devoted lockdown times to study, reflection, research and writing.

Reading as remedy

Lifelong readers and book lovers have adjusted themselves to lockdown conditions, making the most of circumstances as they arise. They have embraced a friend that prevents them from feeling bored. As a saying goes:

A book is a companion that does not flatter you, a friend that does not irritate you, a crony that does not weary you."

One of Prophet Muhammad's closest companions, Ali ibn Abi Talib says: "A person who keeps himself occupied with books, will never lose their peace of mind."

In countries that have a developed reading culture, COVID-19 lockdowns created a greater demand for reading materials like e-books.

Therefore, there has been a sharp rise in digital library memberships. Accordingly, authorities gave free access to reading materials to promote people's psychological and mental health.

Reading in solitude

In "Of Studies" (1625), seventeenth-century English philosopher and essayist Francis Bacon says, "Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring." COVID-19 lockdowns forced many into self-isolation and solitude, which to Bacon is the best condition for study and scholarly research.

Lockdowns have provided readers and writers with a conducive environment to engage in reading activities and developing mental abilities. Therefore, their best companions during lockdowns have been books and other reading materials.

Print or electronic reading materials?

Electronic reading materials are cost effective and easily accessible; their font is usually flexible so readers can enlarge or reduce its size for convenient reading; they do not occupy space in the house and many of them can be stored in a single device; they do not need dusting and wiping; and most importantly they are more eco-friendly.

However, the same level of caution needs to be observed when choosing print or electronic reading materials, especially for children.

Books as companions

Books are our companions; but we must remember, like good companions and bad companions, there are good books and bad books. As, in "Liberty of the Press" (1844), nineteenth-century American Catholic writer Orestes Brownson says:

"Books are companions, and bad books are as dangerous as any other species of companions. Evil communications corrupt good manners, and we may be corrupted by reading bad books as well as by frequenting bad company."

Despite this caveat, the importance of developing reading habits and inculcating them in children is universally acknowledged. In the past, there were various avenues of acquiring knowledge.

People used to learn through social interactions with friends and relatives. They met scholars and physically attended symposia and meetings. However, many of these opportunities have significantly shrunk for reasons of lifestyle choices and, now, for the COVID-19 outbreak.

Therefore, consulting books and other reading materials has remained the best way of acquiring knowledge.

Islam's emphasis on acquiring knowledge

It is puzzling when an aversion to reading and learning is present among educated Muslims. The first revelation Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) received from God came in the form of a command to seek knowledge. Importantly, the 68th surah of the Qur'an is titled al-Qalam (the Pen) and indirectly stresses the act of writing.

Innumerable Qur'anic verses and traditions of Prophet Muhammad emphasize the importance of learning and scholarship. Hence, search for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, and it does not end with obtaining an educational degree.

In this regard, a remark of British writer Marmaduke Pickthall is worth mentioning. In *The Cultural Side of Islam* (1927), he says: "Neither the Holy Qur'an nor the Holy Prophet ever contemplated the existence of an ignorant Muslim. Indeed, 'ignorant Muslim' is a contradiction in terms. In the great days of Islam, an ignorant Muslim, like an indigent Muslim, could hardly have been found."

Given the great importance Islam places on reading and intellectual engagement, Muslims should be at the forefront of scholarly endeavors.

Nevertheless, unfortunately, most Muslims in today's world have drifted very far from that benchmark.

As Syed Sajjad Husain says in *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World* (1992): "Many of the real Islamic values, especially the emphasis on knowledge as the key to salvation, find greater adherents outside Islam today than within it."

Conclusion

The days of COVID-19 have given many of us mental space to introspect and to think clearly and differently. Perhaps it is important

to remind people of all persuasions of the benefits of reading that can remedy boredom and overcome anxiety.

Reading can be a good way to spend spare time. It is a panacea for the ennui of the educated, especially during the lockdown period. In most cases, readers do not have to follow any schedule and can consult reading materials in their own time and space.

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